

Duxbury Fire Dept., Past and Present

By PAT BARLOW

To some it might seem the Duxbury police and fire departments are each other's alter ego, or surely kinsmen by long association of their community responsibilities. On close inspection, however, it becomes apparent this is not the case. The histories and traditions that have evolved over the years to define each department have little more in common than commitment to the safety and security of Duxbury.

Long before there was a formally organized fire department in town, there was need for protection against the stray spark from the hearth; the lightning strike that could set buildings or woods ablaze; the wind-borne ember that could ignite a vast dry meadow. As early as the 1830s, Duxbury had 2 horse-drawn hand pumpers; a board of engineers to, among other duties, direct their use; and 2 companies of call men (volunteers) to respond to alarms. In 1895, town meeting authorized the purchase of extinguishers, one for each of 12 fire wards, but quelling a blaze was still iffy business, depending on the immediate water supply, and how fast men and hand pumpers could get to the scene. Another burning issue until past the turn of the century was which fire company had the authority to put out what fire. In effect, the town had 2 companies and 2 chiefs -- the forest warden (chief engineer) and the fire department chief. And the rivalry between the 2 factions is said to have created mischief.

Some accounts say Duxbury first established a board of fire engineers (note addition of the word "fire") in 1900, with Frederick Knapp as chief. But in a speech he gave in 1929, Knapp said the board wasn't organized until 1906, at which time he was "4th forest fire warden." This and other discrepancies in the department's early history may be attributed to sparse documents, overlapping duties, postponed implementation of official decisions...and just plain contrariness. Judging by remarks left behind, previous residents tended to be independent thinkers, not easily swayed by those who advocated modern methods of firefighting. Or modern anything else, for that matter.



The old fire station on Bluefish River recently received a facelift.

They were also vocal and particular when it came to whose command they would accept when the alarm was sounded. While call men (and women and children) routinely organized efforts to douse a burning building, forest fires -- grave threat though they were -- did not inspire such cooperative effort. Until Knapp established his authority, controlling a forest fire was left to each man's wits and shovel, by popular request.

Today, Frederick Knapp is recognized as the father of the Duxbury fire department, that paternity beginning, according to different records, in 1898, 1900 or 1906. He is also considered our first official fire chief (1900-1917) though, in 1903 when Powder Point Hall burned to the ground -- the town's worst house fire to that date -- the chief of record was Eden Soule.

Knapp was born in New Hampshire, educated at Harvard as a civil engineer, and became a Duxbury resident in 1885. He developed the Powder Point Boys School into a highly respected learning institution, and for 18 years was headmaster and kindly advisor to his students. He was described by many as a brilliant man of unlimited interests, as fond of debating philosophical questions as expounding on his avant-garde theories of forest propagation, conservation and fire protection. By all accounts, he was a gentle scholar and skilled persuader who avoided conflicts with his peers while adroitly advancing his often unpopular suggestions for improved firefighting techniques. Forestry and firefighting were not only his avocation but his passion, and he invented numerous methods and devices in both fields that were decades ahead of his time.

In a posthumous tribute to Knapp's many years of service to Duxbury, his friend and successor, Hortence Merry (chief, 1917-1942) called a meeting of South Shore firefighters on Valentine's Day, 1933. Town forest was named in Knapp's honor during the ceremony, and the following month a boulder was put in place off Mayflower St. with a plaque bearing his name. The Duxbury fire companies further published a slim blue volume containing the eulogies delivered that Valentine's Day. They tell of a man who well-deserved commemoration though, at the

time, some of his ideas were still being ridiculed. Such ideas as the use of radio communications by fire companies; public relations and publicity campaigns to educate the town about fire protection and prevention; teaching school children the hazards of fire; and the setting of back fires to contain a burning forest.

Other of Knapp's ideas fared better in his lifetime, such as using Standish monument and church belfries as observation towers, and organizing the fire wardens of the South Shore for mutual aid. He never stopped emphasizing the dangers of forest fires because in his day, especially Sundays, nature-lovers were remarkably careless with campfires and smoking materials. Without phones, dependable roads or motor vehicles, a small woods fire could become a serious threat to the town before the wits-and-shovel brigade had collected either.

And the vicissitudes of early firefighting were legion. Sometimes there was a water supply, sometimes not. Sometimes there was a horse ready to hitch to the pumper, but not always. Frustration doubtless peaked when it was discovered the town's fire extinguishers, purchased in 1895, were largely out of commission in 1900. Few knew their location and fewer cared that they had become useless or were buried from reach and memory beneath the manure heap out back.

By 1904, Knapp and his cohorts had remedied community carelessness with the appointment of 8 wardens; a considerable increase in apparatus; "our first fire wagon"; and a committee to investigate fire protection. The small but serious-minded group also published the locations of 48 new extinguishers. The listing included stores, post offices, a stable, town office, town farm, and 2 otherwise equipped fire wagons. The trouble with the wagons was getting them hitched to horse propulsion and under way in time to do some good. By one account, horsepower on the hoof was no guarantee of locomotion.

By 1906, according to Knapp, the ad hoc fire department had 100 extinguishers, 2 privately-owned fire wagons, 4 town-owned wagons with 2 more on order and, "Though legally independent, the 2 (fire) departments were run as one, with men and apparatus available for both house and forest fires." He was obviously pleased to have achieved this cooperation, and with its success.

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Chief "Hot" Merry was no less dedicated and determined than Knapp, nor less prepared to challenge any fire, anywhere, any time, no matter how vile the weather or frustrating the conditions. In the 42 years Knapp and then Merry commanded Duxbury's call men, firefighting became more and more an application of specific skills and experience than merely organizing the able-bodied to man the pumps and buckets. Even so, Duxbury did not have an officially-staffed, professional fire department. Father trained son and brother trained brother in the wily ways of enemy fire and the prescribed methods of combat. Not surprisingly, firefighting often became a family tradition generation after generation, and had an established code of conduct and discipline long before there were job manuals or standardized rules and equipment.

Until 1955, we had but one paid permanent fireman, Dick Whitney, who lived with his family at the old Hall's Corner fire station for some 20-odd years, on duty 24 hours a day. (The present headquarters on Tremont St. and auxiliary station in

Ashdod weren't built until 1968.) When Whitney retired, the Hall's Corner station went to 3-man shifts, 56 hours a week, paid. In 1962 it had a 9-man skin-diving team, and in 1963 an ambulance was added to its inventory of vehicles and responsibilities. In 1979, 11 years after it was built, it was decided to keep the Ashdod station manned 24 hours a day. This is but a glimpse of the department's continuous upgrading of services, manpower and performance. In addition, it has continuously studied advances in training and technology, and the chief and his deputy coordinate civil defense efforts in the event of disaster. They are also qualified in the use of radiological equipment to detect nuclear contamination.

Despite a sincerely modest reluctance to describe itself so, the fire department did not become a tough, proud, extremely well-disciplined and professional organization on the strength of its fleet of work and rescue vehicles and modern technology, though all of that helped. Its heart and soul were seeded by stalwart men who never cared much for the art of compromise or anything less than complete dedication to duty before self.

Today, like a hundred years ago, nobody thinks about the fire department until there's an emergency, or the wail or a siren prompts momentary apprehensiveness, or a burst of sympathetic adrenalin makes you glad help is on the way to someone in need. In 1982, the Duxbury fire department answered 1,127 calls; 631 of them were for emergency medical assistance -- the ambulance; 179 calls were accidental alarms; 74 were details (somebody locked in or out, cleanups after a fire or accident); 39 calls for burning without a permit; 49 problems with hot wires or appliances; 29 auto fires; 36 grass and woods fires; 26 chimney fires; and 12 building fires resulting in damage. Of the remaining calls, there were 10 false alarms, 11 for mutual aid, and 31 miscellaneous. In the past 20 years, there have been 5 civilian deaths attributed to fires, and no serious injuries or death of a firefighter as the direct result of a fire.

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The atmosphere at fire department headquarters on Tremont St. could almost be described as tranquil. Then an undercurrent of tension is detected, a waitingness of men and machines to leap to call. The rule here is to be prepared for anything at a moment's notice, be it fire, accident, or any number of other emergencies. It could be to rescue little climbers from the top of a 50-foot tree or extricate a horse from a hole in a barn floor. It could also be to help the harbor master rescue victims of boating, swimming or fowling mishaps, give medical assistance at home or on the highway, or pry open a wrecked car with the jaws of life. The challenges are endless and ever changing.

It might be a rude awakening for aspiring little firefighters to know the men keep the station spotless themselves. No dust, crumbs or clutter anywhere, not even in the kitchen, bunkroom or dayroom which comprise the station's Spartan living quarters. There is a television set, but except for special events it is never on during the day. This is a station rule, one of many that govern on-duty decorum.

Rules, of course, suggest a measure of discipline, and discipline is not only a departmental tradition but the foundation on which it functions. In the workday, the men not only maintain the buildings inside and out, they also keep their equipment, gear, vehicles -- and themselves -- in tiptop condition. While they are clearly at ease with one another and superior officers, the chain of command is distinct, protocol is respectfully observed, camaraderie is low-key, and performance of duties is methodical. At one time benefits and socials were popular with the department and it participated in regional competitions called musters. But, in the last decade, favor shifted from quasi recreational events to pursuit of physical fitness programs and specialized training.

These days there is more to being a firefighter than having the know-how and stamina to hose down a blaze. Entry level applicants must be high school graduates, have a mechanical aptitude, be in excellent physical condition, and be certified emergency medical technicians. Experience as a call man is a plus point as is a college background in fire science. Other qualities required of a firefighter may surprise the layman: ability to communicate with the public both comfortably and effectively; maintain friendly and supportive relationships with associates; and adapt well to a highly structured work environment. Military experience is valued because those who have it are accustomed to following orders under stress,

and without questioning the authority of those in command.

Duxbury's incidence of serious fire is low. The department is expertly staffed and skilled in fire prevention; our building code is strictly enforced; our water supply is considered more than adequate; and our equipment and vehicles (not all in their prime) are kept at maximum efficiency. The department is justifiably proud of its performance record -- Duxbury's rating improved by a point after the last fire insurance survey.

What are firefighters *really* like? If there is a prototype, he (or she) is compassionate and competitive in the extreme. Though these 2 qualities don't always work as harmonious virtues in other professions, they are the heart and soul of the firefighter. Compassion for those in peril; determination to beat the odds against life and property imperiled. Another evident quality is modesty. Firefighters don't talk much about their work except where it is understood no man is a hero by himself.

On the other hand, whenever Duxbury's fire department has needed a budget or manpower increase, its chiefs have become uncommonly articulate. Howard Blanchard, who retired this year after a decade as chief, regularly out-debated public administrators at town meeting to win the voters' approval of his recommendations. Some of those he defeated time and again still smile and shake their heads at his uncanny knack for unknotting municipal pursestrings. In similar style, his heir-apparent, Carl O'Neil, took the microphone at town meeting this year and, despite strong opposition by the selectmen and finance committee, wooed close to \$9,000 for a new chief's car. As was characteristic of Blanchard, O'Neil didn't belabor the need for the car or soap the voters into a lather about it. He stated his case thoroughly and logically -- and won it.

Carl O'Neil, Blanchard's deputy for the past 10 years, is 46 years old and has been a member of the Duxbury fire department for 15 years, though he has been "related" to it all his life, including 4 years as a call man. He was born into a family of firefighters beginning with his great-grandfather, Horatio Chandler, who owned a sawmill on Lake Shore Drive. His grandfather, Edward O'Neil, was a call man who farmed 165 acres off Winter St. His grandfather was also superintendent of streets, and in one capacity or the other, always had men on hand for fighting fires, including Carl's father and brothers. One of Carl's earliest memories is cranking up the fire truck kept in his grandfather's barn where a work crew could get to it quickly. The O'Neil farm is still in operation as a dairy enterprise and Carl is its owner-administrator. He has a degree in animal science from UMass, is a scuba diver and certified EMT, in addition to having completed formal training in a variety of subjects related to firefighting.

Unlike our police department, the fire department operates under the "strong chief" law and is autonomous in the assignment of personnel. Because of, or in spite of this, the fire department has a long reputation for being run smoothly and avoiding controversy. The exception came last year over the appointment of a new lieutenant. Then Chief Blanchard elected to give hopefuls a written exam to determine their grasp of theory. His son scored among the top 3 and got the appointment. The spectre of nepotism rattled its chains before the misunderstanding was laid to rest and criticism withdrawn. As it turned out, the chief used more exacting criteria to decide the promotion -- the exam was just a supplement -- and given his absolute authority, owed no explanations to anyone, anyway.

As Blanchard's successor, Carl O'Neil will command a deputy, 3 lieutenants, 3 full-time and 3 part-time fire alarm operators, 16 full-time firefighters, and 15 call men. (Call men are paid paraprofessionals these days.) His salary will be approximately \$33,000 a year, and his deputy's salary will be about \$30,000, or 4.6% more than the highest paid subordinate firefighter. If he's anything like his predecessors -- and he is -- Carl O'Neil will be on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and among the first to arrive at the scene of a fire or accident.

A charming and vivid chronicle of the Duxbury fire department was written by the Rev. Canon Robert Merry (the late Chief Merry's son) in 1980 and is on file in the Duxbury Room at the library. The 3-part article, published by the *Clipper* that year, details the development and expansion of our fire department, putting people, places and events in perspective for history buffs. Since that article -- much of it the writer's personal recall -- is so eminently readable and readily available, little of its information has been repeated in this article.

And how can a town meeting be a forum for open and free discussion when there isn't time for open and free discussion.

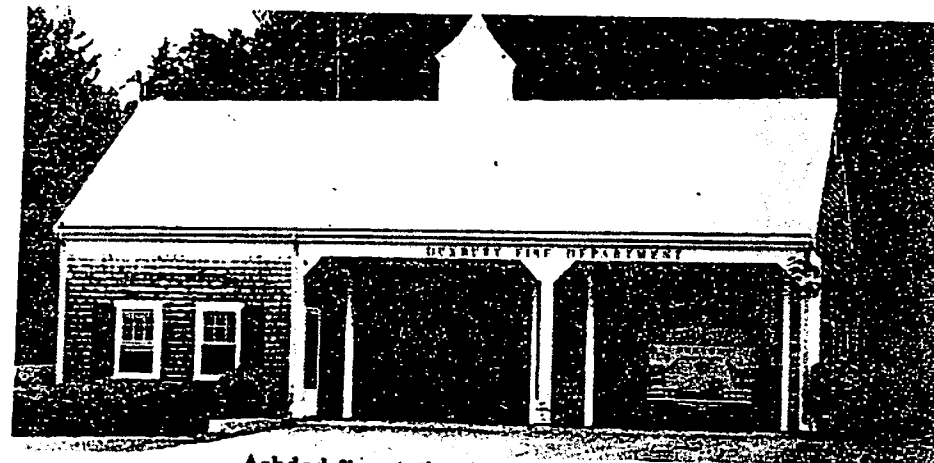
...Perhaps a first step...would be to reinstitute the Growth Policy Committees set up in the first Dukakis administration....These committees, which led to major changes in state policy toward towns, brought together, often for the first time, all the various agencies of town government, as well as people hitherto uninvolved in town affairs.

All were asked to think of the future of their towns, set priorities; do for their communities what elected set officials had been unable to do -- sit back and think.

This sort of grassroots discussion, a true forum, needs to be reestablished, and may in fact be the best way to bring about much-needed reform -- from within.



Central Fire Station on Tremont St.



Ashdod fire station in West Duxbury.
Photos by Maddie Merrifield